

JUST THE FACTS

WHAT IS ADDICTION?

AN EDUCATIONAL FACT SHEET FROM
THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS

Once it was thought a person was addicted to a drug only if he needed the drug daily or if he went through withdrawal symptoms (vomiting, seizures, cramps, death) when he abruptly stopped using the substance. It was believed that alcoholics and addicts were unemployed, poor and from the inner city.

These are misconceptions. Many addicted people do not use drugs or alcohol daily and do not experience physical withdrawal when they stop using. The majority of addicted people are employed and appear to be functioning normally.

Another misconception dealt with the differences between physical and psychological addiction. Physical addiction was thought to be the determining factor in addiction, and little attention was paid to psychological addiction. For example, many people believed that cocaine was not a dangerous drug because it was psychologically, but not physically, addictive. The current cocaine epidemic in this country has broadened the understanding of addiction. It is now known that all addictions are characterized by physical and psychological changes. Addiction is far more than physical or psychological dependency: it is a primary disease.

CHARACTERISTICS OF ADDICTION

LOSS OF CONTROL

The user cannot predict what will happen when he uses the substance. One day he may be able to stop after one drink or after one line of cocaine. The next day he may not be able to control his use at all.

COMPULSIVE PREOCCUPATION

The addict spends a great deal of time thinking about the substance.

CONTINUED USE DESPITE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

If drinking or drug use causes problems, but the user continues to do it, he is tempting addiction or is already addicted. The person has lost voluntary control of the use of that substance.

A nonuser or casual alcohol/drug user may have difficulty understanding why addicts don't just stop. Use and abuse of psychoactive (mood-altering) drugs seem to be voluntary; addiction seems to be characterized by involuntary, compulsive use. In most cases, addicts don't stop because they are addicted; they cannot stop on their own.

1 IN 10 BECOMES ADDICTED

The rate of addiction varies from substance to substance. Crack cocaine, for example, has a much higher potential for addiction than other drugs. It is estimated that about one of every 10 people who uses a psychoactive substance will become addicted. Generally 10 percent of the population will have difficulty stopping their use by themselves. Many will need professional help or the help of a support group.

The 90 percent who use drugs or alcohol but do not become addicted also have an impact on society. The use and abuse of mood-altering drugs contribute to the overburdening of the health care, criminal justice, and educational systems. Both users and abusers have the potential for driving under the influence, overdosing, committing crimes to support their use and abuse, and contributing to family discord and violence.

WHAT CAUSES ADDICTION?

There has always been controversy over the cause of addiction. Historically, it was thought that addiction was caused by lack of willpower, by poverty, moral weakness, mental illness, genetics, family socialization, anti-social personalities, and societal problems. To-

day addiction is seen as a disease and like any other disease, many factors contribute to it.

THE DRUG

Some drugs are more addictive than others. This is due to the pharmacology of the substance and how it affects the mood of the user.

THE USER

The genetics of the user and his overall self concept contribute to the potential for addiction. A person from a family with alcoholic or drug-addicted parents is twice as likely to develop an addiction as one who is not. Studies are now being done to learn more about the genetics of addiction and to develop early intervention programs for people who have a greater potential for becoming addicted.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Does the culture or society tolerate excessive use or abuse? Does the society give mixed messages about the use and abuse of psychoactive substances, endorsing some and condemning others? Does the society tolerate public intoxication or driving under the influence? Is psychoactive substance use and abuse glamorized in the media?

People who have low self concepts, who feel bad about themselves, have a higher rate of addiction. People with low self concepts use psychoactive substances either to enhance or create pleasure in their lives or to decrease the constant emotional pain they live with. The better a person feels about himself, the less likely he will be to use or abuse psychoactive substances. A society that has easy access to drugs, that has a population that is "addiction-prone" due to genetics or emotional pain and that has pro-use or unclear norms is a society prone to addiction.

INTERVENTION — HOW TO HELP

An addict usually does not know he is out of control. He looks at his drug-using peers and his own use appears normal in comparison. He needs objective feedback on his behavior.



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It was once thought that an alcoholic or other drug abuser had to "hit bottom" before help could be offered and accepted; that an addict could only get better if he was self-motivated to change. This has changed to the view that a skilled professional counselor can motivate an addict toward recovery. This is called intervention.

Intervention is a process that helps an addict recognize the extent of his problem. Through a non-judgmental, uncritical, systematic process, the addict is confronted with the impact of his alcoholism or drug use on others. The goal of intervention is for the addict to accept the reality of his drug- or alcohol-impaired lifestyle and to seek help. Most prevention and treatment facilities can help arrange an intervention and assist the addicted person and his family in finding appropriate treatment.

Groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Cocaine Anonymous (CA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) provide continuing support for people with drug and alcohol problems. These "fellowship" programs exist in most communities and are free of charge. The only requirements are a willingness to choose total abstinence and acceptance of recovery through fellowship with other recovering people, one day at a time. Fellowship groups are a valuable resource for the addict, his family and friends. The telephone numbers of local chapters of AA, CA and NA are in the phone book.

CONCLUSION

Drug abuse is the excessive use of legal mood-altering substances and the use of illegal drugs. Addiction is the extreme end of a continuum that starts with the first use of drugs or alcohol and progresses through experimentation and abuse to addiction.

Professional treatment and prevention programs and community-based organizations are available to help the addict and his family. These resources can help with education, intervention, and treatment of the addict and those who care about him.

For more information, contact your local drug and alcohol treatment program or call the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association at 850-878-2196. The Association maintains a directory of all licensed alcohol and drug abuse treatment programs in Florida.



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FOR MORE INFORMATION CALL THE FLORIDA ALCOHOL & DRUG ABUSE ASSOCIATION RESOURCE CENTER
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